

## THE MEDITERRANEAN TERM FOR CABBAGE

JOHN A.C. GREPPIN

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

The standard etymological handbooks continue the idea that Gk. κρόμβη 'cabbage, *Brassica oleracea*<sup>1</sup>,' NPer. *kalam*, *karam* *karanb* and Arm. *katamb* 'id,' are cognate with OHG (*h*)*rimfan* 'to wrinkle, to bend,' from IE \**kremb*-<sup>2</sup>. Mention is not made of the Semitic cognates Arab. *karanb*, *kurunb*, Heb. *kərūbba* and Syriac *kərab̄bā*, which are presumed loans from Indo-European, or Greek.

---

1. There are numerous sub-species of *B. oleracea*. They include cauliflower, brussels sprouts, and broccoli. The genus *Brassica* also includes many other edible species, among which are rape, black mustard, and the turnip. Thus the genus *Brassica* is prolific, as is the species *B. oleracea*.

2. The added cognate, Skt *karambhā* 'asparagus,' cannot be taken seriously.

One can further cite Georgian *kalnabi* and some scattered Daghestani forms. The difficulty, in spite of the reasonable relationship of cabbage with an Indo-European root for 'wrinkle,' is that the plant cabbage is most unlikely an Indo-European plant; rather, bearing in mind both the Greek and the Persian forms, the plant and the word would more likely be of Mediterranean origin<sup>3</sup>.

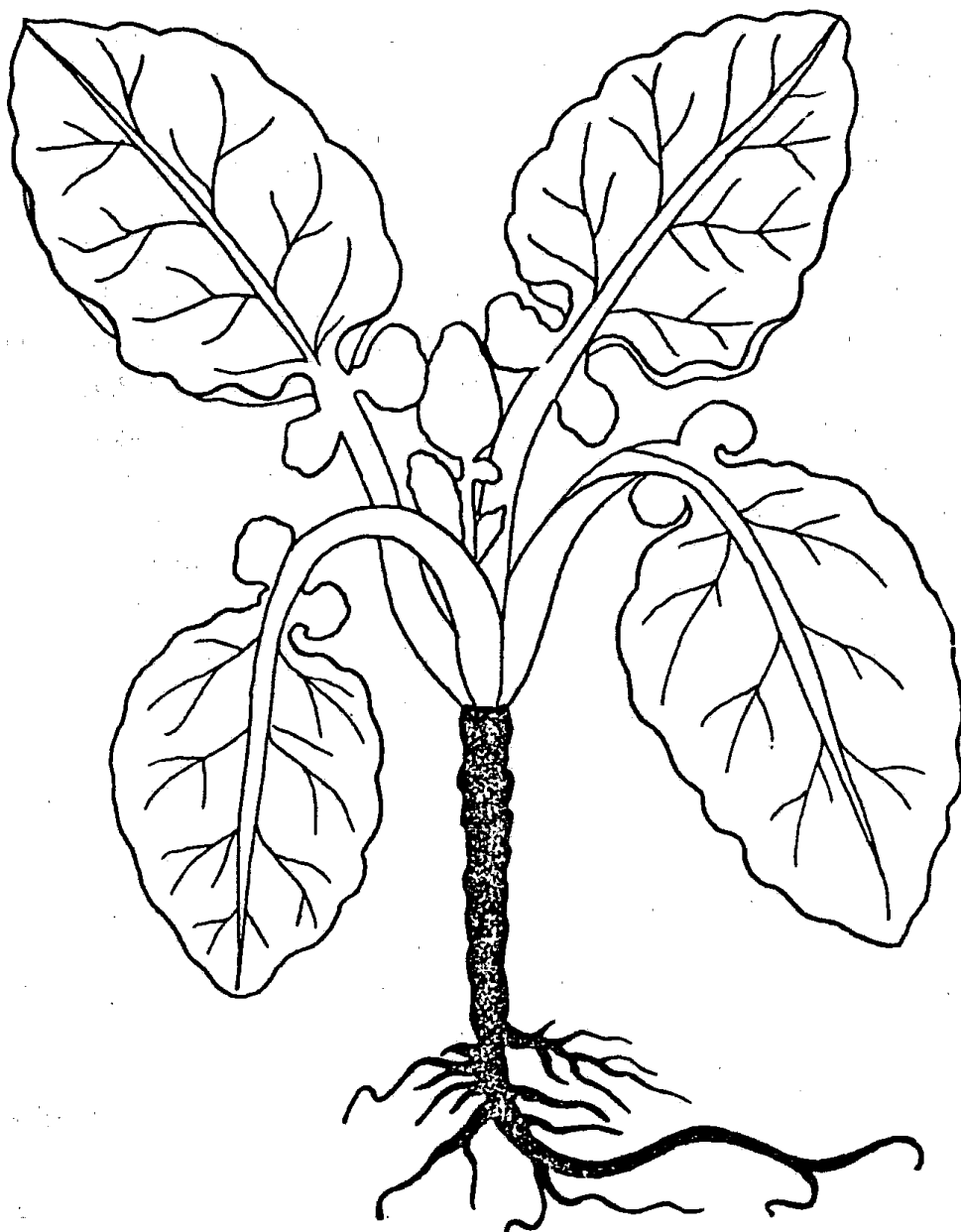
We have little archaeological evidence for cabbage, since pulpy vegetables "stand only a rare chance of charring and being preserved in archaeological contexts" (Zohary and Hopf 1988: 167). Yet its botanical origin is clearly in the central and eastern Mediterranean (Snogerup 1980; distribution map p. 123) which Tsunoda (1980a: 110) confirms<sup>4</sup>. Terms for cabbage are known in Hebrew and Greek from early times. The varied Iranian terms (*kalam*, *karam*, *karanb*), as well as the Armenian (*katamb*), are close in form to both the Greek and Semitic words, but these are clearly not squarely aligned in a phonological sense. Things are just slightly askew.

And though the Semitic terms have been called loans from one of the Indo-European forms, it is more likely that the Semitic sources, along with Indo-European, got the terms from a separate but unknown third source, since *k-r-n-b* is neither a Semitic root,

---

3. The early cabbage was not the headcabbage we know now, but a series of leaves growing loosely off a stem. A Byzantine drawing of that cabbage, done in 512 A.D., is reproduced on the following page (Gunther 1934: 159).

4. Though neither Snogerup or Tsunoda show the plant wild in the Levant, the creeping dessication of the last three thousand years may well have erased its breeding areas. But had not *B. oleracea* ever grown wild in western Asia, it would have been difficult to explain the Persian forms which, with the closure *-nb*, could not have been derived from Greek.



κρόμβη ήμερος *Brassica oleracea*  
Cabbage

nor of a possible Indo-European shape. Parallels can be found in the term for 'camel,'<sup>5</sup> 'wine,'<sup>6</sup> 'pitch,'<sup>7</sup> and numerous other terms which can be considered Mediterranean<sup>8</sup>.

Let us consult each language group individually.

The oldest recorded use of the term 'cabbage' is in Greek, where κρόμβη is known in a fifth century fragment of an Attic comedy by Teleclides Comicus. The fragment is most brief (ναὶ μὲν τὰς κρόμβας) and tells us little about what made cabbage so funny (Kock 1880: I: 209 [fl 27]). In the fourth century Aristotle gives a fuller comment, mentioning the term twice in *Historia animalium*: (551<sup>a</sup>16) ῥάφανος, ἣν καλοῦσιν τινες κρόμβην ("ῥάφανος, which some call κρόμβη"); (551<sup>a</sup>31) καυλοὶ τῆς κρόμβης ("the stem of the κρόμβη"); there is an additional use, rather interesting, in the presumably spurious *Problemata* where cabbage is touted as an antidote for a hangover: (873<sup>a</sup>37) ἡ κρόμβη παύει τὴν κραιπάλην. The medicinal use of the cabbage is significant, and Dioscorides (II: 120) considered it a curative for upset stomachs, diarrhea, diminished vision, gout, congested nose,

---

5. Compare Arm. *utt*, Urartian *ultu*, Avestan *ušt*ro and Akkadian *udru* 'camel'; it is continued on into Sanskrit as *uṣṭra* 'buffalo, camel.'

6. Here see the description in Gamkrelidze 1984: 647-648 with Caucasian cognates.

7. Compare Arm. *kuṣr* 'pitch, often of the cypress tree, Gk. κυπάρισσος 'cypress tree, Grg. *k'up'ri* 'pitch,' Arab. *kufr*.

8. Here the monograph of Reinhold Strömberg can still be read with benefit. For his comments on κρόμβη, see 1940: 24, 30. Less helpful is Carnoy 1959: 95. The term is not mentioned in Masson 1967.

trembling and even baldness<sup>9</sup>. Seconding Aristotle, Dioscorides also notes that it overcomes the maladies which come from the excess consumption of wine (τὰς ἐκ κραιπάλης δὲ καὶ οἷνων κακίας σβέννυσιν).

The Persian terms کلام، کرم، کرنب (*kalam, karam, karanb*), are not known in a Middle Persian text, and of course no *-l-* sound appears in Avestan; the phoneme *-l-* is found in Iranian only from the Parthian period (250 B.C.). It is possible that *karan* and *karanb* could be earlier, but they are certainly not recorded in any early text.<sup>10</sup> The existence of an *-l-* in Persian implies a loan from some source, though here that source cannot even be guessed at; it could even have been another Iranian dialect.

The Armenian term appears in the earliest fifth century texts, and Faustos Buzand (I.21 = 1883: 48) records the term 'cabbage-seller' (*kaṭambavačar*)<sup>11</sup>.

---

9. The popular idea that cabbage is a curative continues to this day; see Hiatt 1989.

10. Iranian words appearing with a mysterious final *-b* are not uncommon, and can occur on a word irrespective of origin: note NPer در (*dar*) 'door,' but درب (*darb*) 'id' (of Indo-European origin) and دم (*dom*) 'tail,' but دمب (*domb*). It would seem most likely that a Persian form with final *-b* was original (note Gk. κρόμβη) and then the final *-b* was lost on analogy with *darb/dar*, *domb/dom*. NPer. *kalam* is now the standard form.

11. Եւ այգալէս հանդերձ նոքոք ինքն իսկ կայսրն ի շինականութեան կերպարանս, ի կաղամբավաճարի օրինի, մատնէր ի բանակն Պարսից "And so, in the form of a rustic cabbage-seller, the emperor himself went together with them to the camp of the Persians." An amusing use, recorded by the medieval lawgiver and fablist, Mkhitar Gosh, shows that the

The Georgian term *kalnabi* is no longer in use<sup>12</sup>, *k'ombost'o*, a loan from Russian *kapusta*, now being standard (Makashvili 1961: 225). The term does not appear in Abuladze's *Lexicon of Classical Georgian* (1973), but it is cited in Andronikashvili's thorough work (1966: 195) on Iranian loans in Georgian. The several appearances of the term in East Caucasian languages, Udi *k'alamb* and Lezghian *kalamp'*, *gilamp'*<sup>13</sup>, would seem most likely to come from Armenian rather than Georgian though it is possible, of course, that they are directly from the same source as the Armenian and Georgian terms.

It seems rather possible that both the Armenian and the Georgian terms are derived from an unattested NPer. *كلنب\** (*kalanb*), with the assimilation of *-nb* in Armenian<sup>14</sup>.

The Semitic occurrences are usually viewed as loans from Greek (Vollers 1897: 303), but in their various forms (Heb.

cabbage was still seen as a plant active on the digestive system: (Bedrossian 1988: 60) "When I'm eaten raw, I act as a laxative; when cooked, I bind" (Gosh 1854: 59): *Էթէ կերեալ ոք հում, զորովանն լուծանեմ; եւ եփեալ, պնդեմ*. Stella Vardanyan (1988: 225) also states that the Middle Armenian physicians saw cabbage as a curative for such allergies as asthma and eczema.

12. Löw (1928: 486) lists another form showing metathesis, Gk. *καρναβίτι*, but I cannot confirm this word. There is also an Ar. *كرنبيت* (*karnabīt*), which I can find listed nowhere else, but the *ط* (*t*) of which hints at a loan word.

13. The Daghestani words are derived from Adjarian's root dictionary (1926) and I could not find them with these spellings in Ghukasyan's Udi lexicon (1974) nor in Talibov's Lezghian lexicon (1966).

14. We must also assume than NPer. *kalam* is derived from a later assimilated *\*kalamb*.

*kērubba*, Syr. *kārabbā* and Arabic *karanb*) they only approximate the Greek; Arabic *karanb*, *kurunb*<sup>15</sup> would seem closer to the NPer. form *karanb*, from which they could have been derived. None of these forms are from an early date. Heb. *kērubba* does not appear in the Bible, and the word is not sighted until the *Mishna*<sup>16</sup> where it has a good frequency.<sup>17</sup> The Syriac material is later, noted in the *Geoponica*<sup>18</sup> (Lagard 1860: 35.27-29) and known also from Hunain's translation of Galen (36v = κρόμβη). The *Geoponica* dates from the seventh century; Hunain b. Ishāq lived 809-873.<sup>19</sup> The

---

15. The only derivatives of this root are *karnaba* 'to cook cabbage,' and *kurunbīyah* 'a special cabbage dish,' and the lack of semantic diversity for this root also implies a loan origin.

16. The *Mishna* is a commentary on legal problems first written down in the second century A.D., but which represents the language as it was in the second century B.C. Parts of it could stem from as early as the fifth century B.C.

17. The term for cabbage and other foods are found frequently in the *Talmud*, where dietary laws are discussed. In the *Kilayim*, (I.3) the fourth tractate of the first *Order Zeraim* of the *Mishna*, we read: הַלֶּפֶת וְהַנְּפוּץ, וְהַכְּרוּב וְהַתְּרוּכָתוֹר, הַתְּרָדִים, אֵינָם כְּלָאִים וְהַבֶּה. "Turnip and radish, and cabbage and cauliflower, beet and garden-orach are not forbidden junction one with the other."

18. Here we have כְּבִישׁוֹ יָבֵשׁ בְּבִשְׁתּוֹ "for by its nature the cabbage is dry." This surely must be 'dry' in the Galenic sense.

19. Though I do not have the Syriac text available, the Armenian translation (fifth century A.D.) of Ephraim (fourth century A.D.) has *katamb*: խսկ հողանման կտեմ կաղամբ և այլ ամենայն կծու "but the earthy warm cabbage and all other pungent (vegetables)" (1836: 204-205).

Arabic material is even later, though the term appears widely: Avicenna (980–1037 A.D.; *Qānūn* II = New Delhi 1987: 342) lists cabbage as being ‘warm in the first degree and dry in the second’<sup>20</sup>.

It seems impossible to say what the original form of the word was, whether it had an *-r-* or an *-l-*, though more likely there was an *-n-*, followed by dissimilation from *\*knamb*, and it is certainly unwise to postulate that the Syriac and Hebrew forms were derived from Greek. Such a transference would appear in Semitic with a closer phonetic fit<sup>21</sup>. But we can plausibly suggest that the Arabic terms *karanb*, *kurunb* came from NPer. *karanb*. One also cannot safely argue that the Georgian term came from Armenian though early preliterate Armenian loans to Georgian changed shape, having been filtered through the Zan dialects<sup>22</sup> (Laz and Megrelian).

We see that an Indo-European channel does not work, nor does a channel from Semitic. The phonological links are too irregular. And this, coupled with the knowledge that the cabbage is not botanically of Indo-European provenance, leaves us with little choice of etymological origin other than the vague term

---

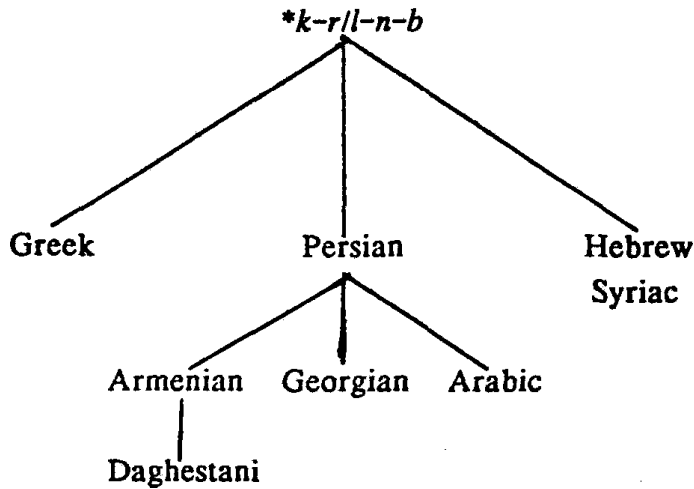
20. حار في الاولى، يابس في الثانية. This point does not correspond in degree with what Galen actually wrote (Kuhn 1821: XII: 42; VI: 630–631).

21. Here see Lewy 1895, and such examples as Gk. μέταξα, Aram. *mēṭaksā*, ‘silk’; Gk. σιρός ‘a pit in which to keep grain,’ Heb. *sirā* ‘kettle,’ etc.; that nasals exist in both members of a Greek–Hebrew isogloss is seen in Gk. πανδοῦρα ‘lute,’ Heb. *ṭanbura*. However, Greek loans into Hebrew are rather uncommon, and the examples given above are all considered to be from Hebrew into Greek. But note Gk. συνέδριον → Heb. *sanhedrin* ‘type of court.’

22. Here see Djahukian 1987: 595–597; Deeters 1926: 46.



'Mediterranean.'



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abuladze, Ilia V. (Abulaje)

1973: *Jweli kartuli enis leksik'oni*. Tbilisi: Mecniereba.

Adjarian, Hrachia (Աճառյան, Հրաչյա Հ.)

1926-1935 Հայերէն արմատական բառարան. Yerevan: Yerevan University Press. Reprint 1971-1979. Yerevan: Yerevan University Press.

Andronikashvili, Mzia K. (Andronik'ašvili, M. K.)

1966 *Nark'vevebi iranul-kartuli enobrivi urtiertobidan*. Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Press.

Avicenna (الشيخ الرئيس ابو علي الحسين بن عبدالله بن سينا)

1987 القانون في الطب, Volume 2. New Delhi: Institute of History of Medicine and Medical Research.

Bedrossian, Robert

1988 *The Fables of Mkhitar Gosh*. New York: Ashod Press.

Carnoy, A.

1959 *Dictionnaire étymologique des noms grecs de plantes*.  
Louvain: Institut Orientaliste.

Deeters, Gerhard

1926 "Armenisch und Südkaukasisch: Ein Beitrag zur Frage  
der Sprachmischung." *Caucasica* 3: 37-82.

Djahukian, Gevork B. (Ջահուկյան, Գեվորգ Բ.)

1987 Հայոց լեզվի պատմություն: նախագրային ժամանակ-  
աշուրջան. Yerevan: Press of the Armenian Academy of  
Sciences.

Ephraim

1836 Սրբոյն եփրեմի մաթեմատիկայի մասին. Volume 4. Venice:  
San Lazzaro.

Faustos Buzand (Ps. P'awstos)

1883 Բուզանդարան պատմություն. St. Petersburg: Imperial  
Academy of Sciences. Reprint 1984. Delmar, New  
York: Caravan Books.

Gamkrelidze, Thomas (Гамкредидзе, Тамаз Б., Вяч. Вс. Иванов)

1984 Индоевропейский язык и индоевропейцы. Tbilisi: Tbilisi  
University Press.

Gosh

1854 Առակք Միսիթարայ Գոշի. Venice: San Lazzaro.

Ghukasyan, Voroshil (Гукасян, Ворошил)

1974 Удинско-азербайджанско-русский словарь. Baku: Elm.

Gunther, Robert T.

1934 *The Greek Herbal of Dioscorides*. Oxford: Oxford Uni-  
versity Press.

Hiatt, Judith M.

1989 Cabbage: Cures to Cuisine. Happy Camp, California:  
Naturegraph Publishers.

Kock, Theodorus

1880 *Comicorum atticorum fragmenta*. Leipzig: Teubner.

Kuhn, C. G.

- 1821-1833 *Claudii Galeni opera omnia*. Leipzig: Teubner.  
Reprint 1965. Hildesheim: Georg Olms.
- Lagard, A. P. de  
1860 *Geoponicon in sermonem syriacum versorum quae supersunt*. Leipzig: Teubner. Reprint 1967. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Lewy, Heinrich  
1895 *Die semitischen Fremdwörter im Griechischen*. Berlin: R. Gaertners. Reprint 1970. Hildesheim: Georg Olms.
- Löw, Immanuel  
1928-1933 *Die Flora der Juden*. Vienna and Leipzig. Reprint 1967. Hildesheim: Georg Olms.
- Makashvili, Alexander K. (Maq'ašvili, A. K.)  
1961 *Bot'anik'uri leksik'oni mcenareta saxelc'odebani*. Tbilisi: Sabč'ota Sakartvelo.
- Masson, Émilie  
1967 *Recherches sur les plus anciens emprunts sémitiques en grec*. Paris: Klincksieck.
- Snogerup, S.  
1980 "The wild forms of the *Brassica oleracea* group ( $2n = 18$ ) and their possible relations to cultivated ones." In Tsunada 1980b: 121-132.
- Strömberg, Reinhold  
1940 *Griechische Pflanzennamen*. Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift XLVI. Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag.
- Talibov, Bykar B (Талибов, Букар Б.)  
1966 *Лезги чІаланни урус чІалан словарь*. Moscow: Soviet Encyclopedia.
- Tsinuda, S., K. Hinata, and C. Gomez-Campo.  
1980a "Eco-physiology of Wild and Cultivated Forms of *Brassica* and allied Genera." In Tsinuda 1980b: 109-120.  
1980b *Brassica crops and wild allies: Biology and Breeding*. Tokyo: Japan Scientific Societies Press.

Vardanyan, Stella

1988 Միջնադարյան Հայ բժշկապետների հայացքներն  
ալեբգիկ հիվանդությունների ու նրանց բուժման վերաբեր-  
յալ. *История естествознания и техники в Армении* 8: 220-241.

Vollers, Karl

1897 "Beiträge zur Kenntniss der lebenden arabischen Sprache  
in Aegypten." *Zeitschrift der Deutschen morgenländischen  
Gesellschaft* 51: 291-326.

Zohary, Daniel, and Maria Hopf

1988 *Domestication of Plants in the Old World*. Oxford:  
Clarendon Press.

